

As the Wind Blows

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Summary: Velma stood firm in the path of a hurricane with Amber by her side. Corny knew the danger. And this storm would change their lives.

## 1. Chapter 1

"From the National Weather Service. Hurricane warning is in effect for the Greater Baltimore/Washington DC area for the next 24 hoursâ€¦" The radio announced as Corny drove to the station. He was surprised at how empty the streets were. Unlike other people in the world, his workday started at 3 so rush hour was never a problem, but the traffic was unbelievably light for a Friday, on his side of the highway anyway. Packed on the other. The sky was a beautiful blue with clouds in the distance over the ocean as he whizzed along. That's the way it is with these storms, it's always beautiful before they hit. He found it amusing. However, today he was much more annoyed than amused. What moron would call people to work during a hurricane warning? No other moron than Velma Von Tussle.

Corny had started receiving phone calls from parents early in the morning. It started simply enough with a call from Noreen and Doreen's mother. He had been invited to dinner at the girls' house the week before and the family was lovely. Their father was a gregarious jokster with a rapier wit. The rapier constantly pointed in the direction of Velma which made Corny feel quite at ease. He called her things Corny could only dare to think and although he was surprised at the openness of the man's vitriol, he laughed constantly. Their mother was a sweet housewife who fussed and met his every need before he even needed them. She made him miss his own mother who passed just two years before. Kind and softspoken, she sang like an angel while she led a sing a long from the piano. The girls' siblings were just as talented and their littlest sister danced and performed for him, selling herself to be on the show. He promised to give her a second look when she turned 14 and that she was very good. The child blushed and ran out of the room with a huge smile. Her mother whispered that she had a crush on him and he just

made the child's week. He couldn't help but smile. He had a marvelous time.

The call came earlier than he was used to and he stumbled out of the bedroom to snatch the phone. "Hello?"

"Mr. Collins, this is Mary Campbell. Noreen and Doreen's mother?" she said quietly.

"Did I wake you?"

"Uh, no. I try to be an early bird," Corny lied, "What can I do for you?"

"Well, a call has come in from the girl's school stating that they are closed today." She began, "but we haven't gotten a call from the station. My husband told me to call there and see what was going on. There is a big storm coming, you know."

"Yes, yes of course." he responded.

"Well, I called the station to see if we missed the call for the girls not to come in today. However, a message came back from Mrs. Von Tussle stating that the girls were to report at the regular time for the show.' She said with her voice shaking.

"WHAT?" Corny cried, "That must be wrong. She can't expect these kids to come down. They were talking evacuation yesterday, it must be wrong."

"She said that if the kids didn't show up to dance, they would be off the show. My girls want to go, butâ€¦|.."

"Look, Mrs. Campbell," he interrupted, "I'm sure the message got garbled somewhere down the line. Your girls are not off the show if you leave the city. No one is. In fact, I'm sure the show won't run. Let me call down there and talk to Velma. I'll give you a call back but if you don't hear from me and you want to leave, go. I'll make sure that every dancer is back when the show airs again."

"Oh thank you! I'll tell the girls." Her voice sounded with relief, "Oh and thank you for the lovely flowers Mr. Collins. You didn't have to do that. We love having you here."

"It was nothing at all. I just wanted to say thank you for a great time." He smiled, "Now just get whatever you need together and I'll place that call, alright?"

"Yes, we'll be waiting."

"No Mrs. Campbell, don't wait. Go if you need to go and keep those kids safe. They are more important. Take care and stay safe."

"I will, thank you again." She said as she hung up the phone.

No really, she must be mistaken. There's no way Velma could be this stupid. She may be a witch but she didn't control the wind. Mrs. Campbell had to have heard wrong or some idiot made a snap decision. No way would anyone expect those kids to stick around for a dance show. He was about to pick up to dial when the phone rang again.

"Hi Corny, it's Link."

"Hey Man, what's shaken?" Corny asked almost knowing what it was about.

"Listen, my dad told me to call you. We want to leave before the storm but we haven't heard anything from the station. Have you heard when we should be back?"

"I have no idea. I just got a call from one of the moms who said that she heard the kids should reportâ€¦" he started.

"No way Man," Link broke in, "No way will my parents let me stay, not when they are going to my Aunt's in Virginia. The radio is saying to get out. I won't be allowedâ€¦"

"Link just go." Corny interjected as he flipped the radio on, "I'll give you a call when all of this is over. I'll take care of it. Get out of town while you can and I'll make sure you know when to report after."

"Thanks Corny. I owe you." Link hung up as Corny shook his head. Something wasn't right.. He needed to get to Velma fast. The phone rang again. Parent after parent called him. He spent the next hour reassuring mothers and dancers that this was all a mistake. He would cover them when they get back but the radio called out the evacuation orders as he spoke and they should get going. He knew he should go too. Go to his brother's or his sister's inland, but he knew that he promised to straighten out the confusion. He had to place the call before he left.

He finally got a break and dialed the station. "WXYT channel 12. May I help you?"

"Hi Marlene, it's Corny Collins, can I speak with Velma?" he said as he pulled off his robe, 'It's important."

"Yes sir, Mr. Collins, right away"

Corny cradled the phone as he waited and tried to make coffee. Finally her syrupy voice came on the line, "Velma Von Tussle, Station Manager."

"Velma, this is Corny. What's going on down there? My phone is ringing off the hook from the kid's parents telling me that you want them down there."

"That's right." Was all she replied.

"In a hurricane? Are you looking at the live feed from the network, Velma? They're evacuating. You want these kids to come into the eye of the storm? For what? To broadcast to an empty city? Come on!" he cried

"The newscasters will be on the job, my dancers will be on the job," she stated without a hint of sarcasm, "If they want to remain on the show, they will be here."

He stood shocked. He took the phone away from his ear and stared at

it. He had to be hallucinating. He brought it back up to his ear. "Velma, you're kidding right? Newscasters are adults who choose to stick around, not a bunch of kids being blackmailed into putting their lives in danger. It's a Cat four. If it bounces back to the coast, the tidal surge could take out part of downtown. Maybe even you. Are you insane?"

"No, I'm a professional. If the news department is willing to stay, then everyone should be. We want to keep the ratings in the timeslots. Many people are staying and we want to go on with programming as normal. What time can I expect you?"

"ME?" he cried, "Round about the day after tomorrow when this all clears. And if I were you Velma I would get out too. Let the feed run from the network and go. All of you. You aren't safe downâ€¦|â€¦|"

"Corny, you're panicking for no reason and if we have to Amber and I will coverâ€¦|.."

His stomach flipped, "Oh no, you don't have her down there, do you?"

"Of course!" Velma affirmed, "Where else would she be?"

He thought for a minute. Okay, Velma Von Tussle wanted to hang out in the eye of a hurricane, so be it. Hell, she might ride out on a broom and have a house drop on her, but the kid didn't deserve to be along for the trip. She might be a spoiled brat but she's only seventeen. Bad things can happen and Amber didn't deserve to be in the middle of it because of her mother's stupidity.

"Velma, I'm coming down there." He said as he slipped into his trousers from the neatly folded pile of laundry in the kitchen.

"I'm glad you changed your mind Corny!" she said triumphantly, "My way is always the right way."

Ugh, yeah. Her superiority complex is putting all of them in danger. He would get there, get them out and drive to his sister's. Lord God this woman was a maniac. Being maniacal can get you killed when you apply it at the wrong time. This might just be the wrong time.

He poured his first cup of coffee for the day and grabbed a baseball cap as he headed out the door. Hell or high water, and that could be pretty high water, he had to convince her to leave or at least, let Amber go with him. Their safety depended on it.

## 2. Chapter 2

2

His car began to shake as the wind kicked up and the clouds thickened. Good thing his lanes were empty. With every gust, he had to overcorrect and he swerved across the broken white line. He had driven in storms before, but this seemed different. It was a gust with a steady wind building up behind them. It was hard to keep control so he was glad to see his exit coming up on the right. As he pulled off, he saw a Police car blocked the ramp. He pulled up as the

officer waved him to a stop.

"Sir, we are asking that everyone evacuate the city." The officer said nearly screaming above the wind. "I'll have to ask you to turn your car around."

"Afternoon Officer!" he smiled his best, "I'm just here to pick up some friends from WXYT. They are stranded down here and I just want to get them out."

The man squinted at him, "Hey, you're that music guy. My daughters watch your show. Turn it up too loud and annoy their mother to no end." He tossed his head back and laughed, "I just cover my ears."

Corny tittered with him, "Yeah, I get that a lot from parents. So can I get through? I've got some newsmen and at least one dancer down there waiting for me."

"I'm not suppose to let anyone through. Mister."

"Aw please." Corny continued to smile and plead, "They won't leave until I get there with the car. Now if that was your daughter, wouldn't you want to let her ride through?"

The officer waved him by and yelled out, "Make it quick, Man. They're saying this thing is turning towards us. You've got to get out while you can!"

Corny waved out the window as the first drops began to fall. This didn't look good and he really just wanted to turn the car around. Stupid as it seemed, he had a mission that he didn't want nor was sure he could do. If something happened to these people, he couldn't live with himself, especially the girl. She needed a hero and he hoped he could be one. He pulled the car into a spot by the front door. He never got a spot on the street on a normal day. Now he had his pick. He took a deep breath, zipped his leather jacket, grabbed the brim of his cap and attempted to open the door. The wind pushed it back. He pulled the handle again and threw his weight against it. It slowly gave way. He maneuvered his body out of the small space he could manage and the door slammed shut behind him. Then the wind took him and he nearly spun. Good Lord, this was brutal. He had a doubt that he could even drive out if he got them, but he had to try.

Marlene sat staring at a monitor by the front desk. "Guiding Light" played as a crawl ran across the bottom of the screen announcing the evacuation of Baltimore County, all coastal communities and an alert to seek shelter immediately. There were directions to head to Civil Defense shelters around the city. She never heard him come in.

"Marlene, you need to get out of here now. Where is Joey?" he asked.

Marlene jumped at the sound of his voice, "Oh Mr. Collins, what are you doing here?"

"What are YOU doing here? You're suppose to get out." He reported as he leaned on the desk.

"Mrs. Von Tussle said that we have to stay or not come back. We would both be out of a job. Joey is waiting to cover your show. Our shifts end at 5." She replied with a worried look.

"No, Marlene your shift ends as soon as I can get Joey to you."

Marlene had married their cameraman Joey a year ago. She had recently announced their first child was due in October. The last thing she needed was to be stuck downtown in this. "Where are you parked?"

"Mr. Collins, we need these jobs. With the baby coming we can't beâ€|â€|." She stammered.

"That's why you need to go. I'll talk to Velma. But in the meantime, gather your things and be ready. Joey should be here in a few minutes. Go to the nearest shelter that they announce if you can't make it out. Just get going as soon as he gets here. Okay?"

Tears were in her eyes, "Thank you sir, I will."

Corny ran to the back studio. It sure looked like a normal day. People were milling around, flipping through papers and watching monitors. The only difference was the monitors blared warnings to evacuate and showed freighters leaving the docks for the safety of the high seas. Amber stood staring up with a worried look on her face.

"Amber." He said as he touched her shoulder.

She was startled, "Oh!" she stepped back and out of her own thoughts.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," he said sincerely, "What are you still doing here?"

She seemed breathless, "Mother wants to stay on live. She says that we'll be okay. The building is secure."

"The building is close enough to get this full blast." He replied, they're telling us to evacuate. This is not one of the skyscrapers. It's one floor and sprawling. Where does she want you to go when the winds kick up even more than they are now?"

"I, I don't know." She whispered. He looked at her and saw the child in her eyes. She was terrified

"Listen." He insisted as he held her by the arms, "This place needs to clear out now. Where's your mother?"

She was still stunned as she looked at him with wide eyes. "I think she's in the control booth." Her eyes glanced that way, "but she's not going to go. She already told the Police once that we were staying put." Her eyes dropped, "I'm really scared, Corny. I don't want to be here."

He rubbed her arms, "It's okay. I won't leave here without you, understand? I promise. Everyone needs to get to higher ground. She

can stay if she wants to, but she'll be here alone. You can count on it."

Amber smiled up at him. He somehow had a special place in his heart for this girl. Yes, she held an air of privilege and made some of the other girls so mad they retaliated against her, but Corny always knew it was her mother pushing her. Like the small girls in the many pageants he hosted before landing his own show, mothers like hers could bring out the worst in their children. Spoiled and bratty, they terrorized those around them with the blessings of their stage mothers, most of which relived past years through their girls. And that was Velma Von Tussle reliving her stupid crown won twenty years ago. Amber endured abuse and held herself as the royal bitch her mother wanted her to be.

But Corny had seen when the other kids left and she sat under her vanity with tears streaming down her face, waiting and hiding from her mother until she was ready to gather her up for the lonely life they led. Velma had made so many enemies in the business that invitations to the best events were more obligation than anything else. Velma attended parties with big names while Amber was paraded as the star. He could see the longing in her eyes when the kids talked about picnics and parties she was not allowed to attend. The girl just wanted to be a teen like all the others. She never got the chance. Always practicing, always performing, she never attended a Sock Hop or date unless it would advance her persona, or in actuality the persona her mother wanted. She never got to be out of the spotlight. Never just Amber. Always Amber Von Tussle, prima donna. Nothing less would her mother accept.

He had watched her grow from the nearly skinny 14 year old who danced with a gymnastic style to, in his humble opinion, the prettiest girl in the group. Other girls said she knew it and acted like it, but Corny saw through the glaze her mother had baked on her. They just didn't see what she was because they left at 5. Amber was stuck until 7. He watched her doing homework on a high stool, legs swinging back and forth. He watched her pick at salads while those around her chowed on burgers. He watched her gaze at the monitors with a quizzical look when maps of the world were presented on the nightly news. In fact, he realized now, holding her as she trembled, he watched her a lot. Really more than he cared to admit. Good Lord, he thought as he released his grasp, this should not be occupying his mind at this moment or any moment. She is only a teen and he is pretty far from that. Some things just aren't right.

"Let me go talk to her." He said as he looked toward the booth, "Everything will be fine."

Corny rushed to the control booth, stopping only to tell Joey to get his wife and leave. He would be responsible for their employment. While he continued on his path, the first Cat 4 wind hit and the building groaned. The lights flickered and he heard a few pops. He looked up and swore he saw the building sway. He had to work fast. He pushed the door and it slammed open with a loud bang.

"Velma, what the hell is wrong with you?" he demanded.

"Well, I don't' know what you mean?" she said in mock surprise.

"You have pregnant woman and a little girl here. For what? For

ratings? You think you'll get your Emmy for killing people?" he growled. "No one is going to be left to watch your damn station. Why are you doing this?"

"Oh both of them want to stay here!"

"Bull, I spoke with them, they are scared to death and to blackmail these people with their jobs for your insanity isâ€|.well isâ€|.Insane." He was so angry now he was spitting words. What was wrong with his broad?

Suddenly a commotion started before the cameras. National guard troops rushed in with total disregard for television time. Corny felt a ta-da moment in the making. The calvary had arrived!

### 3. Chapter 3

3.

Corny grinned at Velma and shrugged. No time for self-satisfaction, but he had to get a bit anyway. The troops were there to escort the occupants out, plain and simple. The commander yelled, "Who is in charge here?" Velma flipped Corny a look and walked out.

"I am." She announced, "I am Velma Von Tussle, the Station Manager."

"Ma'am, we have orders to evacuate this building. Now is the time for you to leave." He said in a strong voice.

"But we are staying, this is the news!" she exclaimed.

"No ma'am, you cannot stay," the commander retorted, "Army Corp of Engineers has deemed that all flat roof buildings are in danger. Can't hold the weight of the water. Now gather up your things and we will be taking you to the nearest shelter."

"OH no" Velma cried. "I know my rights! This is a first amendment issue. The news must go on!"

Corny threw his eyes to the ceiling. If it were another time, he would have laughed out loud for the ridiculous statement that just fell out of her mouth. Instead he was relieved that the commander looked at her with calm resolve and waved to his troops. People were already hurrying out. He turned to the control panel and set the broadcast to national feed only. He slammed the door behind him as the commander was telling Velma that he had the power to arrest and she would be removed whether she liked it or not. She flipped her hair as the commander grasped her arm.

Suddenly a huge groan emitted from the building. It swayed, lights fell and dust began to swirl around them. There was a collective gasp and people covered their heads as they began to run. Corny watched as the troops calmed the remaining employees and lead them out the door. He prayed that Marlene and Joey made it out safe. He grabbed his cap from the desk and proceeded to follow the others when Velma yelled out.

"Amber!" she cried out, "Where is she? Did she go already?"



The others shook their heads. Ronny the engineer said, "I saw her go toward the dressing roomsâ€¦"

Velma suddenly turned from lunatic Station Manager to panicked mother. "My daughter! Amber!" She started to run toward the hall but was held back by the commander.

"No ma'am, one of my men will get herâ€¦" he started to reply but the wind took the building again and things began to crash. The commander's words burst through Corny's brain.

"Get out NOW, this building is going down!" he pushed Velma to another soldier and started directing everyone to the exit.

Velma was screaming for Amber as the soldier finally picked her up. Hysterical tears were flying. Corny couldn't believe the scene. They were leaving. All of them were heading out the door. Even the commander began to hustle out when he swept the room with his eyes and they landed on Corny. "Come on!" he yelled, "Go now!"

They were leaving her. In the Name of God, they were leaving her behind. His words came back to him, he told her he wouldn't go without her. That HE would not leave her behind. He gave a salute to the commander and turned. He began to run down the hallway as he yelled out, "Velma I'll get her!"

"NO, you idiot!" the commander shook his head. His troops could not be endangered for one girl, or one fool with a hero complex. He turned to help his soldier get the hysterical mother out. His heart went out to her but he could do nothing else. He helped to get her into the troop transport and she collapsed on the floor. The commander knew that there was a really good chance this lady would never see her daughter alive again.

Corny barreled down the hallway screaming her name but the wind made his voice almost silent. He slammed the Ladies Room door open and yelled as he checked each stall. She wasn't there. He thought of her terrified and alone. The thought quickened his pace as the lights flickered and he heard ear splitting cracks all around him. A part of the ceiling smashed behind him taking a monitor with it. This was not good. The building wasn't going to take this wind and the drains on the roof couldn't move the capacity of the rain. This place was a time bomb and if he didn't find her soon, he might not be able to find her at all. At this moment death didn't scare him, but thinking of her panicked and abandoned did.

Suddenly a thought came to him. He knew where she was. He reversed his course and headed back to the dressing room. So many times he saw her sitting under that vanity, lost in her own pain. It was her retreat and he never had the heart to confront her there. She had a difficult time keeping up the facade her mother built sometimes. That place was her own, to be whom she wanted to be. Not the spoiled golden child but the girl who read romance novels by flashlight and dozed in a dreamy sleep. Her haven, her sanctuary. She had to be there.

He threw the door open and ran to the vanity. "Amberâ€¦" he yelled as he overturned the chair. She hugged her knees and her head rested on them. She looked at him with vacant eyes, too horrified to react.

His heart jumped. "Come on" he screamed as he grabbed her arm and pulled. She woke from her trance and threw her arms around him.

"Don't leave me, please don't leave me" she cried.

"No, baby I'd never do that." He yelled as he started to stand.

An explosion rocked them. A sound like a truck hitting the building burst in their ears. Corny looked up to see the far ceiling begin to drop. He pushed her back under the vanity and the world went dark.

#### 4. Chapter 4

4.

He heard crying from far away. It was his sister. She was always skinning her knees from falls on her skates. She would run to him, battered and bloody, crying into the middle of his stickball game. The other boys had teased him for giving in to her and called her a crybaby but he would hear none of it. He even blackened his best friend's eye for his taunting. It didn't matter at all. He loved the girl and being eight years older he felt like her uncle, rather than her brother. He would gently pick her up and cradle her as he walked her back to mom for comfort and clean up.

"It's okay" he would say, "You'll be alright. I've got you."

But wait, Candy was 18 and married. What was she doing on skates? That wasn't right. He didn't hear the cries of a six-year-old, they were older tears. Woman's tears. He tried to move but his head felt as if it would split open. A trickle of warmth ran into his eye. He could feel a gentle hand wiping it. He groaned.

"Oh God! I thought you were going to die." Amber threw her arms around him and he brought his hand up to caress her hair. "There's so much blood."

"I'm not dead yet." He mustered up a smile. "Are you okay?"

She nodded against his chest. He looked around. There was water everywhere. A florescent light was in pieces next to him and he could see blood on a few of them. Ouch. The roof on the far side of the dressing room reveled nothing but sky. A calm sky, which scared Corny more than the storm. Only the main beam over their heads had saved them from the crushing debris. But he knew they had to get to safety. They were in the eye and it wouldn't last long. If they didn't move and the walls gave way, it could be the end for both of them. He had to get up and get her to the basement storage room.

"Amber, we've gotta go." He said as he pushed himself up. Nauseating dizziness overtook him and he sat back hard. He swallowed the bile that came up in his throat. Her 'hero' was going to need some help himself. Concussions can be a strange thing. Sometimes one makes it through with a headache, sometimes the body went into shock. Shock was not what they needed at this point. He took a deep breath and sat up. The room swirled.

"Don't move" she commanded, "It's over now. We can stay here until they come to get us." She smiled.

"No, it's not over." He stated as he grimaced, "This is the eye of this storm. As soon as it passes the wind will be back again and the rest of this building may not make it. We have to get downstairs."

Her eyes grew wide. "But the wind has stopped. The rain. It's over."

"It's not, believe me and we have to get out of here." He said as he rested his chin in his hands for a moment, trying to get his equilibrium, "Get us some of those dresses and the cushions from that couch. We have at least another couple hours until this is over and we have to get going."

She placed his hand on top of the cotton covering his head. "Put pressure on this." She commanded. He heard material ripping and she came to him with a pile of make-up sponges cradled in her skirt. "I passed First-aid class!" she said proudly as she held the strip of material in her teeth. As she removed his hand and the old bloody dressing, she gently placed the sponges on the open wound above his forehead and tied the strip around his head. She giggled.

"You look like a bunny."

This was the girl he knew. The happy wondrous person who shined only when her mother was too busy to notice. Laughing hurt, but he couldn't help it. She beamed.

"Come on, bunny girl, help me up and we're heading downstairs. If there isn't too much water, we'll do better down there."

She stood, held both his hands and did her best to counterbalance his weight. He came up with much more ease than he expected. His eyes focused around the room. "Do you know if there is a first aid kit?" he asked.

"Yes, but it's pretty empty. Some alcohol that's I used to clean that out, some band-aids, some aspirinâ€¦"

"Oh grab that aspirin, my head is pounding" She scurried off, leaving him leaning against the wall for support. "My mother has brandy in her office, do you want that?"

He didn't want to panic her. Any kind of sedative could put him out. "No that's okay, the aspirin will do." He said as he crunched the bitter pills.

"Well I've tasted it and it isâ€¦" her hand flew to her mouth. She confessed an ultimate sin that didn't fit with her diva personality, "You won't tell, will you?"

"That you snatched your mother's brandy? I have too."

They laughed together and he grew serious. He could hear the wind beginning to pick up, "Come on, we've got to get down. Can you manage that stuff?"

She tied the couch cushions with a belt that she found in the closet. With the clothes stuffed in between, she had a nice carry handle. "Pretty resourceful there, Miss Von Tussle. Were you a Boy Scout?"

Her head flew back as she laughed. "Right! My mother wouldn't let me be an "anything" scout. That's not for future stars, well beneath us." She slipped under his arm to support him. "Corny, where is she?" she asked quietly.

"The National Guard took them to shelter just before I got to you." He stated as they moved toward the basement door.

"So why didn't you go too?"

"I promised." And he didn't have to say anything more.

## 5. Chapter 5

5.

They looked over the storage room in the basement with Amber's reading flashlight. It was no great prize. It held Christmas trees, old sets, kinescopes and unused furniture. It wasn't very big but was big enough to hold them, safe from anything else that came. There was about an inch of water on the floor. Corny leaned down, dipped his finger in and tasted it. It was rain water, not salty at all. That was good. He was sure there was a tidal surge but the water hadn't reached them. They would remain safe and dry until this was over. Amber guided him to a couch and leaded him against a wall as she cleared it off. She helped him over and untied the bundle she carried with her. He rested his head on his hand as she slipped a couple dresses over him. Satin and tulle wasn't very warm but it was the best they had.

"Corny, I have to change," she announced. "I'm wet and freezing. I brought some of Pauly's clothes for you. Why don't you change too? Do you need any help?" She asked innocently.

Whoa. Even through pounding headaches and nausea the idea of this girl undressing him was too much to think about. His mind wandered as he stared at her. He could imagine her unbuttoning and slipping his shirt down over his shoulders. So close he could smell her perfume. Her hands would run down his chest to find the small zipper pull just below the button of his pants and maybe would brushâ€¦|â€¦|

"Did you hear me?" she broke in, "Do you need help?"

No, no, no this was just wrong in so many ways. He shook his head. "Just toss them over here." He worked to control his breathing. Good Lord, what was he thinking? "I can handle it. Smart of you to remember clothes."

"I'm just going to go back here to change. Don't peek!" She shook her finger at him.

"I swear." And he meant it. If he looked at her now he wouldn't make it through. He had to come back to reality. Seventeen and the boss' daughter didn't make for a great situation. He was staring at

unemployment at the least, at jail time at the most. He wouldn't put either past Velma. More of him ached now than his head. And he needed to stop that as quickly as possible. Her dress flew over the boxes she was standing behind and he looked away. He grabbed the pants that she brought, slipped out of his wet ones and quickly replaced them with the dry pair. He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled out each arm. About that time, she returned from her makeshift dressing room. She stopped and stared. The flashlight was poised on the back of the couch and bathed him in a soft glow. His small gold crucifix glinted as he moved. Her eyes drifted down to his chest. For a moment she paused.

"I'm sorry" she stammered. "I thought you were finished." Even in the dark he could feel her discomfort.

"I just need to get this shirt on." He stated as he slipped an arm in. "Don't stand on ceremony girl, have a seat."

She plopped onto the cushions that she brought down with her. He still felt tension between them but as she adjusted her position she nearly tumbled over backward.

"Amber, there's room on this couch. Come over here."

"I thought you might like to lie down." She said as she tried to balance with grace.

"No, I can't. I can't go to sleep. I'm not really sure what's up with this old head of mine. Sleep is not what we need. Come and talk to me little girl."

She smiled and moved to far side of the couch. They chatted as the winds began to howl again. He was sure that this would be the other side of the storm but it would only last a couple hours. They were safe, they were dry and they were together. He wouldn't have to worry about her this time. It wasn't something he wanted to think about, the concern he felt for her, but as she talked about her latest math test and the shorter styles of dresses coming from Europe, he was glad he was there. He could see himself sitting at his sister's and wondering where she was. Had he cared this much before? Not that he'd admit. But now sitting near her all alone, and living through the shock of losing her just a few hours ago, it was foremost and front in his mind. Not exactly correct for this twenty-six year old man to be looking at a teenager this way, but hell, no one could read his mind. It was all pretty emotional and perhaps it would all go away when they were back in the real world. For now he could allow his feelings to bubble and delight in her every word.

"So my science teacher showed us films of these big storms." She continued with her eyes sparkling, "and we learned that they don't come too often but when they do they come with a furyâ€|â€|"

The pops and crackles above them began again. Amber stopped and looked up.

"Are we going to be okay?" she asked over the noise.

"I think so." He replied honestly, "Most of the shelters they were sending people to were just basements anyway. I think we'll be fine."

"Corny, I have to ask you something." She began, "Did she try? Did she try to get me?"

"Geez Amber, of course she did." He admonished her, "Don't even be silly. I am not kidding you, they picked her up and carried her out kicking and screaming. But you have to understand, the National Guard came in because they thought the roof was unsafe. You saw it, they were right. They weren't leaving anyone behind who stood in front of them."

"Why you then? How come you were let go?" she tilted her head.

"I wasn't." he replied, "I just took off."

"Oh." There was a pause.

"Cause you know, sometimes I think that she doesn't care as much about me as she does the person she wants me to be."

He couldn't say anything. He knew that she was correct in that assumption. If Amber rebelled and became the person that she wanted to be, whatever that was, Velma would have rolling fits. She might even disown her. He had seen it many times in his life. With the pageant princesses who decide that the lifestyle is old and useless. They rebel, their mothers have breakdowns and the guilt is thick on these girls. Many of them go on destructive paths just to be anything but the beauty queens. Some destroy themselves totally. He thought about this as he looked at her.

"Amber, you don't have to be what she wants. You are you. You can go to college, find a real boyfriend, get married, have kids, become a teacher or a nurse. You don't have to be a star if you don't want to." He insisted.

She laughed, but it wasn't merry. "That sounds so easy. Just look at her and say, 'Okay Mother, I'm off to college and a life of my own. No Broadway, no movies. I'm going to be a nurse, not a dancer. A teacher, not a star.' Oh that would go over big."

"It doesn't matter what she thinks. Really. You have your entire life ahead of you. Long after she's gone, you will be living on. Amber you need to think about tomorrow and the next day. Not just the now. She won't be with you forever."

She looked down. "Then I'm alone."

"You don't have to be."

"I do." She looked up at him with a look of despair. "You don't understand. You have a brother and a sister. Your dad is still around. I'm alone except for her. If I fell off the face of the Earth tomorrow, my mother's dreams would die but no one would care. Not one single person."

"I would." He said under his breath as he looked down.

She heard, "That's really nice of you to say. It's very kind, and I mean that. But really,â€|â€|"

His eyes were wide as he looked up at her. "I can't believe you just said that!"

She glanced his way, "Huh?"

"Girl, I sat in my house this morning, getting ready to pack my bag and head for the hills. I drove down here, got out in hurricane force winds, and risked my neck when I could have been high tailing it with the National Guard. I think 'huh' doesn't quite cut it." He said as his head pounded. He had to calm down or he was going to pass out.

"You would have done that for any of the kids." She said seeming to test his words.

"Okay, you're right. You'll always right. Just like your mother." He said subconsciously trying to cut her as easily as she did him.

But it backfired. He could hear her gasp. "I am. I guess I am."

"Sorry Amber. That was uncalled for. I didn't mean it."

There was a deadly silence between them when the first of three explosions went off above their heads followed by horrendous booms. Amber threw herself onto the couch and he covered her. Everything shook.

## 6. Chapter 6

6.

He wasn't quite sure what happened as he lifted his head. He listened but all he could hear was the wind. It sounded different. No longer hollow, just wind. Nothing else moved, nothing fell. He heard howling as if through an open window and a draft that hit them steadily, but they still seemed to be safe and dry.

"I think it's okay." He stated as he rubbed her back, "I don't know what that was, but were looking secure."

She lifted her head and looked at the ceiling. It didn't fall in and they weren't dead. She sat back up.

"I want to go home." She stated, "I want this to be over."

"Me too." He countered, "but I think it's going to be a while yet. Then it's a matter of getting out." He pointed the flashlight up the steps. The door was ajar. It seemed smaller, the wind whistled through it.

"Bet the walls gave way," he said to himself. He placed the flashlight back onto its perch and sat back.

She rubbed her eyes and the last of the mascara with it. She looked more like a raccoon than a girl. What was with women and this black stuff?

"Wow Amber, you should see yourself. Look at your hands." He

laughed.

She looked down at the black smears. Her eyes grew wide. She snatched the underside of her skirt, dipped it into the water and scrubbed. Some came off, staining the dress and some stayed. She licked the material and ran it under each eye then over the lid. It was better, still not gone. She looked up at him, "How is it now?"

He had to chuckle, "Considering we're in the middle of a hurricane and stuck in a basement, you look beautiful!"

He had meant irony but she didn't take it that way, "Thank you." She said as she looked down.

He was silent as he looked away, trying to find a subject to talk about. This was where he dare not go. He also lived the rebel side of these girls. Those who rebelled looked to anyone to take away their pain. Girls from thirteen to eighteen had proposed performing any sexual act on him just to feel close to another human. Skin to skin, touch followed by touch. It was shallow and never brought them the satisfaction they needed. On to another and another just for the momentary pleasure. Some found nice young men to forgive their pasts and give them the love they needed. Others continued on the paths, continually crushed by lovers who took advantage of their openness. He didn't want to go there. Not before and certainly not with her. It was too dangerous for his career to taste this forbidden fruit.

But was it the career that held him back? Did he want to see her in the throws of passion only to walk away in the morning, back to the boys who flirted and flocked around her? She was a kid, with kid's ideas. Not even as mature as the other dancers her age. She had been coddled and preened to stay the everlasting child. With tantrums to get her wants and pouts to persuade her onlookers. She would use this situation to get her way, manipulating HIS feelings, using him to her mother's advantage. He wasn't going there. Not in a million years.

He looked over to her. "Hey, do you think they store any food around here?" since the aspirin kicked in, the headache waned to a dull ache. His stomach still swirled, but it was all he could think to say.

She scowled. "In a basement? I don't think so."

"Let's look." He stood but sat back quickly. "Okay, let's not." That wasn't smart. He laid his head on his arm and felt a thousand shades of green.

Her eyes grew wide, "I don't think you should get up. I'll look." She snatched the flashlight and began a futile search.

He watched the beam travel from place to place as she looked. She chimed out her progress as she went. He knew she would find nothing but it gave her something to do way from his line of sight. He needed a few minutes to get rational and she needed a mission to achieve. Finally, she shined the light back in his direction and plopped back down.

"Nothing" she concluded, "Wasn't there suppose to be Civil Defense kits in these buildings?"



"How did you know about those?' he quizzed.

"Oh we were taught about them in school. You know, 'duck and cover' when you see the flash. In case the Russians get us. Didn't you hear?" she eyed him incredulously.

Okay, this was something that could work, "Why no, what is that about?" he asked in mock ignorance.

She droned on about the Cold War and Communists around every corner. She knew that they would come and put us all in concentration camps if they ever made it to our soil. People like him, the Catholics or any Christians would be brainwashed. They might even be shipped off to Siberia to live for years in the cold wilderness. People like her mother, the powerful in the media would be killed if they didn't cooperate or she herself might be thrown into baby camps like the Germans did in WWII. There wasn't much hope if they made it here. She seemed genuinely afraid of all of this.

"But I guess if we don't make it out of here." She concluded, "it doesn't really matter anyway."

He looked at her. "What makes you think that we're not going to get out of here?"

"That's just the way it is sometimes. When everything looks okay, the ceiling falls in."

He was taken aback by her words. "Not this time."

She didn't look up. "Corny, I have to ask you. Did you come down here just for me?"

She needed his honesty. He wasn't ready to give it. But when he looked at her trembling, he knew that he had to tell her the truth. Hopefully, she wouldn't use it against him sometime in the future.

"I would have to say, yes. If it had only been your mother here, I would be well out of town at this moment." He might regret this later, but now the words spilled from him.

She looked down, "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything, and you don't have to think about how it. You'll go on and have a great life. That's enough."

She leaned into him and kissed his cheek. "Thank you." She whispered.

"DON'T touch me!" his mind screamed. Don't be your mother, repaying your debts with your body. But when he looked at her, she wasn't looking seductively at him, she was blushing and looking away.

He didn't want to want her, but at that moment he would have done anything to have her as his own.

\

## 7. Chapter 7

7.

They chatted for a while about things that workmates discussed. How bad the heat of the lights was, who was missing steps, the latest songs, the new sound of the music. The howls of the wind seemed to slow and Corny relaxed. Sometime in the course of the conversation, he dozed off.

He was warm and comfortable as he dreamed. He was in a house that felt familiar but didn't look it. He wandered from room to room trying to understand where he was. As he turned into a doorway, he saw his sister. Candy sat on a sofa with a blue bundle cradled in her arms. She looked at him and smiled.

When did this happen? Why hadn't he heard? He made his way over to her. "Sit down Corny. Do you want to hold him?"

He was delighted. He slid in next to her and took the baby. He was small and pink as babies come. Smelled of lotion and love. He pulled back the little bunting and tiny fists came up as he yawned. How darling could a baby be? Not anymore than this.

"I think he has your eyes." she said.

But it wasn't Candy's voice. He looked into Amber's face. "Don't you think he looks like you?"

He was overwhelmed. He stammered for a moment, "Um, yeah." He looked back at the tiny bundle and touched the baby's face. He was beautiful. He looked back to her and she beamed. "Are you happy we had a boy?"

We?

"I was sure it was a girl, but you knew the whole time." She giggled as she looked down.

We?

Okay this was just too good. He slipped an arm around her and drew her close. He stared into her deep blue eyes. She leaned in and wrapped her arms around him. "I love you, thank you." She sighed.

"No, thank you. You did a marvelous job." He kissed the top of her head and she snuggled in more as she caressed the baby's cheek. He pulled her closer and stroked her hair. It was all right, just right.

His eyes opened still feeling her warmth under his arm. He didn't want to let the feeling go. He reached up to caress the blonde head leaning against him. And she was leaning against him. Curled in a ball, she silently rested with an arm over him. All resolve was gone. He kissed her hair and she looked up at him. He kissed her forehead and she smiled. Her hand drifted up to touch his cheek. Finally their lips met once, twice then stayed. It wasn't wild, passionate and needy. It was soft and flowing like they had done this a million

times. Like they fit.

He was all too comfortable, all too content. He didn't want to let go of the feeling of her hand in his hair, the gentle curve of her shoulder as he ran his hand down, the sweet taste of her mouth or the scent she emitted. He didn't want to let any of it go, but he had to. He pushed her away.

"Wait, I'm sorry." He said flustered "I shouldn't be doing this."

"Why?" she asked with wide eyes.

"I'm taking advantage of the situation" he thought out loud. "Amber you're just a kidâ€¦"

"My mother was younger than I am when she had me. Am I any less of a woman than she was?" she said as her hand ran down his arm.

Oh God no, more, much more, he wanted to say. But he had to stay firm. "I'm not your husband Amber. There's a difference."

"Yeah, he wasn't either." She said as her lashes fluttered down. "There's only five months between their wedding and my birthday. I'm not stupid. I know how it works."

"I never said you were stupid." He sighed. "You're a very smart girl with your whole life ahead of you. You don't want to start it off wrong. You don't want to make this mistake."

"And what makes you think that it would be a mistake?" she asked.

He didn't know. Right now, he just didn't. He could take care of her, keep her, have a picket fence and a child in every window. Why couldn't he have what his brother and sister have? The normalcy of life. Was that what she was talking about? A future or a now. Statutory Rape didn't look like the best option here.

"Because I'm over twenty-one and you're under eighteen." He replied, "Along with a very emotionally charged situation. You'll feel differently about all of this next week when we're back at work. When your mother is there, when Link is there. You'll see me in a different light and regret what we've done."

"Don't you think I've looked at you in this light all along?" her eyes narrowed, "I'm not a silly schoolgirl looking at her first crush. I've seen you looking at me and I've looked at you. This isn't anything new, Corny. I always hoped I was right and you've shown me I am."

Aw, she didn't need to say that. That didn't make this easier. Of course he saw her smile at him. He denied snapping his glance away from her when she looked over. Or catching her doing the same. It was there all the time. He just couldn't admit it.

"We are both adults. Nothing magically changes on the 9th of March. I pass a milestone, eat my yearly sliver of cake and go on. I'll still be the same person. You see that don't you?"

"And my boss' daughter." He argued, "Amber, you don't know what

you're saying. You're looking at this through your emotions and not your head. You're seeing something that isn'tâ€¦|.."

"That's what I thought. But you treat me differently than you do the other kids. You flirt and joke with them. You basically give me pleasantries and nothing else." She began.

>"I thought it was my mother. You knew that I was different because of her. They were nothing and easily replaced. But you needed to keep me away because I was Velma's daughter. Then Mr. Spritzer's daughter came in. I watched you laugh and joke with her. You dripped with charm. I knew it was me. It wasn't my mother at all. I disregarded it for a while. But, I saw you watching me. Especially when the other kids went home. I could count on your orbit everyday. I liked it. I could depend on it. You were always there."<p>

He sat amazed. He hadn't realized it. How had she?

"And that one day" she continued, "when Becky and I tried those Salsa moves that she learned in her Latin Dance class, I saw you looking. You were flushed. You kept looking away but every time I turned, your eyes were on me. Not her, me. When I danced away from her, your eyes followed. Then my stupid mother came in yelling commands. But I began thinking of you differently. And looking at you in a whole new way. I saw you as the only person who put my wants above your feelings. Or at least what you thought my wants were. You never asked me for anything but were always there. You knew when I was hiding, you knew when I was crying, yet you never asked me to stop feeling what I did. You just saw me."

She looked him boldly in the face. "Until today, I doubted everything I hoped about you. Now you say I'll see you in a different light? There is nothing more that you could do to prove that we've always been this way. I didn't believe it and you may not have wanted it, but it was always there. Tell me I'm wrong" she taunted.

## 8. Chapter 8

8.

He looked down. He wanted to tell her she was wrong, really wanted to, but he still felt the realization of the conclusion. She was right, unbelievably right and he couldn't deny it any more, "I can't. I believe you know me better than I know myself."

Her hand came up and touched his cheek again and she smiled when he turned to kiss her palm. "I can do anything now. Anything. Now since I know you really do care about me. That you'll be there."

He looked in her eyes. "I don't know how much 'there' I can be. You may not change on your birthday, but the law says you do. And under your mother's roof, that applies until you graduate from High School. Amber, legally you are a child. Your mother won't like you swerving away from the path she wants you on."

"So why tell her?" she asked genuinely, "Why do I have to say anything at all?"

He paused. This was her secret. Had she kept it? "Amber, have you ever spoken of this to anyone? Becky, Vicky, anyone."

Now she looked down, "No. I was afraid to be wrong. I was afraid I would look foolish."

"You swear." He asked as he put his right hand in the air.

"On my father's grave." She exclaimed, "Do you know how dumb I would look if I told them and then found out that you were with someone else?"

He smiled down at her. "This might just work." And he kissed her. Softly, giving in to her tender touch. But then he broke away. "Wait, you do you want of me Amber? What is it that you're looking for from me?"

She looked apprehensive for the first time. She looked down. "What are you willing to give me? Or really, what are you willing to give up for me? Because my mother has the power to destroy you in this town. What am I worth to you?"

He looked at her. This was all very new. What was he willing to give up for her? What was she really willing to give up for him? Would it all go away after he wasn't as dynamic as the boys her age? Out of her mother's house and able to run with college friends, would she still want to be with him? He had questions too. He opened his mouth to speak but she interrupted his thoughts.

"This is what I DON'T want from you." She interrupted, "I don't want you to take advantage of this, use me and leave me. I don't want you to tell anyone unless you are willing to stand by me. I'll deny everything that happened here. But most of all, I don't want to lose you once I have you. If I were to give up all that I know, you must swear to stay with me. Understand?"

He was silently thinking. He opened his mouth then closed it again. All the while she looked at him.

"Amber, there is a lot to think about here. And not just for me. You have to understand that when you say, give up everything that's everything. I wouldn't work in this town again, maybe not in television again. All the hairdressers and manicures would be gone. No more closet full of dresses or sports cars. We might have to go far away from here and life wouldn't be easy. It means scraping the bottom. It looks all, Happily Ever After right now, but that's not how it will really be. You'll leave all that you know."

She nodded at him. "There really isn't too much here for me. All of it is my mother's."

He looked away from her, "And that forever goes both ways. I would be giving up my life too, that I've worked very hard for. I'm not sure I see you ready to leave what you know."

She bit her lower lip and her brows furrowed. "Don't you trust me?"

"No." he said knowing it would be catalysis to the Amber Von Tussle hissy fit. She was going to stand up and start kicking anything in her path. Screaming at the top of her lungs. He pretended to put his head in his hands, but really covered his ears.

Nothing came. No screeching bellyaches, no demands of privilege, nothing. He looked over at her and she was thinking, hard. This action meant more than any other. She didn't react like a spoiled brat. She didn't stamp her foot or jump up and down. She was thoughtfully considering what he said. Maybe she was what HE thought she was, what he saw when the cameras were off. He just studied her.

"So what do I do to prove it to you?" she asked.

"Wait." He said simply. "All we both can do is wait. We go on as if nothing happened here. You keep your dresses, your hairdos and jewelry. I'll keep my job. And we'll see if this all looks the same after your high school graduation. If both of us feel the same, we make it happen. If either of us finds that it's too much to ask or our feelings change, we part as friends. It's our secret Amber. No one finds out."

She smiled. "I think that's the best plan. Cross my heart. No one finds out."

"The things we desire most are things we can't have. You may find that it's the dream you want Amber, not me." He simply stated.

"I don't think so." She smiled at him, "but if this is what it takes to prove it to you, I'm willing to go with it." She looked down at her wrist and worked to unclasp the charm bracelet. "Here, you take this. If at any time you want to forget about me, leave this on my vanity. I agree, we part as friends."

He looked at it as she dropped it into his hand. There was more tiny diamonds and gold on the thing than he could imagine buying her. When she thought about it, would she still be willing to give it all up? He closed his hand.

He reached up and unclasped his chain. He dangled the small cross before her eyes. "Same here, okay?"

She smiled back at him. "You won't see that again for months. Are you sure?"

He took her hand and dropped it in. "From your lips to God's ears."

## 9. Chapter 9

9.

The sun shone clearly from the door as the rescue workers made it through. She was still wrapped in his arms when she heard them. She kissed him quickly on the cheek and stood up yelling of their presence. She ran up the stairs as he found his still wet trousers and slipped the bracelet inside.

She held his hand and smiled as they loaded him into an ambulance. He was quickly whisked away. She stood looking around her. He had been right, the walls gave way. She made her way over to her vanity. It was smashed by the beam that eventually fell. She would have been

crushed along with it. Physically, he had saved her life. Emotionally, that needed to wait.

Her mother ran to her and threw her arms around her, moaning how hard it was to think of anything happening to her. She returned the embrace. She had to be the same. But everything was different now. The soundstages were gone. Where would they film? Where would she see him? As the Police car took them back to the precinct, she thoughtlessly fingered the small cross now hanging around her neck. Had she made a mistake opening up as much as she did? She would, from this moment forward spend every day dreading the sight of her own charm bracelet.

Stitches weren't pleasant. Shaving his hair wasn't pleasant either. He thought that he would not have to deal with the thought of a comb-over for many years to come. He viewed himself in the bathroom mirror the next morning. The white patch added character, he told himself. And he laughed. He would have had cuts and contusions all over his body for what he was given. He tried really hard not to be giddy, but somehow he couldn't be contained.

His house made it through pretty well untouched. A couple broken windows, trees gone and water damage. Who cares? As he looked around, he realized that this is what he had worked for. Things. His car was gone for sure, many things he owned were wet. The basement did flood but Christmas decorations and old clothes were meaningless. There was only one thing in his life that had meaning right now. That charm bracelet. He held it in his hand and thought about how lucky he had been to ride out a hurricane. How many men could say that? The best thing that happened to him in his whole life was a huge storm. He shook his head, but smiled.

He made his way to the kitchen and picked up the phone for the hundredth time. Still no tone. Clicking but no tone. In some ways, it was good news. The clicking meant the lines survived but service might be a while. He longed to hear her voice. Just to know he didn't hallucinate the whole thing. Be like Dorothy and wake up in black and white. He didn't want to think about it. He plopped down on the couch, closed his eyes and thought of how soft she was. He smiled at his own denial and her observance. In some ways, he was embarrassed that he was obvious even though he had no clue. He smirked, Nancy Drew, has nothing on Amber Von Tussle.

Amber laid on her princess bed, in her princess pink world. She sighed. One day when she had a daughter of her own, this baby pink will never be a part of her life. She will be in a world of hot shocking pinks, bubble gum or mauve. Never the color that held her in prison, that kept her a child. Her own daughter would dance her own dance and sing her own song. Maybe led by her father. Maybe she would have dark hair like him, maybe his eyes. Maybe that darling cleft in his chin. Naw, that would be reserved for their son. Theirâ€|â€|

Her hand rested on his crucifix. Would she be so bold as to actually wear it? Outside her clothes? She understood where his mind was. She was a spoiled brat. She always got her own way. He took this as another ploy to get what she wanted. But what he didn't understand was how much she hated being who she wasn't. Leaving this behind would be the easiest thing she had ever done. Leaving with him would be pure heaven. He came for her, just her. Not her mother, not anyone else. Funny how things work out.

"Amber! You need to eat this." Her mother broke into her thoughts, "It's oatmeal. You'll like it."

She came up on one elbow. "I'm not really hungry, Mother." She replied, resenting her so highly for breaking into her thoughts.

Velma's eyes moved to the glint of gold that silently skimmed Amber's nightgown. "What's this?" her hand lifted the cross as she stared her daughter in the eyes.

Amber blanched. She had to think fast. "It's his." She replied as nonchalantly as possible. She delicately pulled the chain from her talons, "He asked me to send it to his sister if something happened. Something bad." Amber looked down and mustered up some tears.

Velma didn't soften. "Well I'm sure it's full of bad memories. Give it to me and I'll get it back to him."

"No!" she said much more strongly than she wanted to. "Mother, the man saved my life. I want to give it back to say thank you. I'll keep it until then."

"Amber." her mother sat on the bed as her daughter grasped the chain around her neck, "He didn't DO anything to you down there. He didn't tryâ€¦|.."

Amber was required to laugh. "Corny Collins? Mother, don't be silly. He knows you would have his head."

Velma smiled for the first time. "Yes. I would. Now you eat this and we'll see what shops are open. Bet we can get some good hurricane bargains."

Amber smiled her best fake smile and exclaimed. "Great!" God this woman was so shallow.

She slinked out of the room and Amber went back to her thoughts. In a matter of months she would never have to deal with this again. Her mind drifted to him. Was he thinking of her too? Her eyes glanced to the phone on her nightstand. She picked up the receiver. Nothing. Damn it. A storm brought them together yet kept them apart. Just Damn.

## 10. Chapter 10

10.

The phone rang and he nearly jumped out of his skin. He ran over but stopped before he picked up. Calm was what he needed. Surely not a breathless call of her name. "Hello?" He listened intently as his brother's voice broke through.

"Corny, we've been frantic, "he yelled, "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay Cam, no worse for wear." He replied tremendously disappointed.



"Candy said you didn't show up at her house, Dad is worried sick. Where have you been?"

"In a basement."

"In your basement?" Cam asked, "That wasn't very smart. Why didn't you evacuate like they said?"

"No, a basement, at the station. It's a really long story." He just wanted to hang up and start dialing her number. He owed his brother more than a quick conversation. He explained something that sounded good enough to pass the smell test. Cam seemed satisfied. "Listen Bro, call Dad and Candy for me. My phone is still flaky and I don't want them to get half a call. Would you do that?"

"I guess." He replied, "But they will want to talk to you. When will you be here?"

Oh Lord, not now. "I'm going to stay put until the trees are cleaned up. The roads are totally blocked." Or at least blocked enough for the national reporters to broadcast. "Tell Dad I'll be there Saturday. Send my love."

"But Corneyâ€¦" he tried to interject.

"Can you hear that crackling?" he crunched the nearest piece of paper, "Cam are you still there?" he yelled holding the phone away from his mouth. "I can't hear you, I'll call you back." He hung up fast. Waited a minute and dropped the receiver down to the counter. Not now Bro, just not now.

What the hell was Velma's number? Where did he have it? He ran out and began searching through his desk. She was always such a control freak, day or night her employees should call her if sick or injured. So she could tell them make it in or forget your job. She was like a mother, a wicked stepmother. Every employee's nightmare. He flipped a book and the number stared at him. YES!

He ran back to the phone, pounded it back on hook and picked it back up. Dial tone. He ran his finger around the dial. As it connected his heart jumped. It was busy. No doubt Velma calling people to report to the rubble for tonight's news. He had to let things happen in their own time. No sense rushing anything. He would see her when he could, because after all that had happened, he believed things worked out the way they should. He would be willing to bet on it.

Amber looked in the mirror. Her hair was flat, her eyes were unlined and her lips were pale, but her most prized possession hung around her neck. Where was she going to put this? Mother often went through her room, reading personal notes and diary pages. She knew it. Where was it that this was safe? Where she would never find it? Only on her person. Amber frantically searched the drawers. A safety pin! Perfect. She weaved the chain around and ran the pin through the ring. It was pinned safely in her bra. Until she could find a safer place, this would have to do. School might give her an idea or perhaps with some good thought, she could come up with a place, but where it was made her feel secure.

She was fighting with the buckle on one of her shoes when she heard the phone ring. She tiptoed out and tried to listen to who it was.

The only time her mother used that voice was when she spoke with the Chairman of the Board. Damn. Oh well, maybe he had some ideas about a studio. Just one step closer to where she wanted to be. Within his sight, dancing by his side, she didn't care at all, just near.

"Amber." Her mother whined, "The Chairman wants me down at WBAL this afternoon. They are going to lend us space for the live shows until our building is repaired. No news broadcasts but your show will be back on. Finish getting dressed and come with me."

"Oh, oh Mother, I want to see if Link is back." She pronounced her well practiced lie, "If we can't shop, I'm going to see if anyone is at the soda shop. Maybe I can find the kids."

"Link, of course you should find him." Velma knew the Link/Amber couple was extremely popular. Good for what she needed, "but I'm going to have to take your car. Call around, maybe one of the kids can pick you up."

"No problem, Mother." She smiled that golden smile, "I'll be here when you come back."

She held her breath until the door slammed. The car flew out of the driveway and Amber watched it speed down the street, swerving to avoid the work crews that cleaned up trees. She counted to sixty and ran to the phone. Everyone had his number. She had gotten it from Vicky's book when she wasn't looking. She frantically dialed. Busy. She dialed again, busy. She hung up the phone and sighed. Get that hair up and try again.

Her hair pony tailed, eyes framed with black mascara and good to go. She went back to the phone and dialed. It rang. Twice. He picked up. "Hello?"

Suddenly all the emotion of the past two days came up into her throat. She couldn't speak. "Hello?" she heard him say again.

All she could manage was to whisper his name.

"Are you okay?" she heard through the phone, "Is your mother there?"

"No, she's meeting with the board." She choked out, "I want to see you. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. A few stitches aren't going to get me down. Hey, Link is on his way to your house. You need to talk to him. He's worried about you."

"I don't want to see Link, I want to see you." She cried.

"I don't want you to see Link, I want you to see me." He replied, "but that isn't how it's going to be is it? Remember what we agreed? You have to keep it up. You can do it."

She swallowed. "Yes. I will, but when can I see you?"

"Where's your car? Mine's gone."

"Mother has it. And she saw. She saw your cross. She asked me about it."

"What did you say?"

"You gave it to me to give to your sister. She expects me to give it back."

"Are you ready to give it back?" he asked apprehensively.

"Of course not!" She admonished him indignantly.

"Then we'll work it out. Tell Link to bring you to 'Finian's'. Everyone is meeting there and I can walk. I'll see you there, okay? Don't be long. I'm heading over now"

She hung up the phone and didn't feel any better as Link arrived.

## 11. Chapter 11

11.

In some ways, Amber was born to be an actress. She lived with the ability to turn into anything that was needed everyday. And so it was with Link. She oozed concern and fussed over him just as she had before. Truly, she resented him. Especially now. He was an ornament her mother took advantage of. Another example of her persona with someone rather than herself. She smiled and cooed but mostly she just wanted to go.

He held the door to his car open as she slipped in. He suggested that they head to the soda shop to meet the kids. On cue she whined a little and then gave in. He had spoken to Corny. Their hurricane experience was mentioned. Link seemed apprehensive as he asked her to retell the story. She fluffed by most of it but put on some fake tears while she told of the huge cut on his head and how she, herself tended to it. He seemed sympathetic and rubbed her arm. All in all, he was a good kid. Just that, a good kid.

They pulled into the parking lot at Finian's. And made their grand entrance as the king and queen do. Kids were running from all corners of the shop to greet them. She smiled and talked, scanning the room. When Becky hugged her, she saw him. He was in a corner booth, chatting with Doreen and Noreen. He didn't look over. Her heart sank. She wanted to run to him but knew that this is what life would be like. More distant than before. Her hand went up to the small lump under her left sweater buttons. It was still there and she took some comfort in it.

They drifted to the table and he stood. He grabbed Link and with manly backslaps they embraced. Their eyes met over Link's shoulder and he winked at her.

Suddenly, it the whole situation looked different. She was no longer lost in her own dreams, drifting on may bes or could bes. It was like they were on a mission, a secret mission that no one else was privy too. She smiled genuinely for the first time. She was on his team, they worked together, alone and apart, but together.

"Hey Amber so how are you?" he said gregariously as he put his arms around her. Oh God, this was all going to be so tough.

"Oh I'm fine." She said as he pulled back, "How does your head feel?" she didn't let go and surprisingly neither did he. For just a moment, neither cared about anything but their touch.

He stepped back, "Saved my life, she did" he announced, "I would have bled to death if it wasn't for this young lady and my lucky charm."

She looked over and he held out a new chain from around his neck. There was a crucifix, like the one she held, slightly larger but not too much difference in design. No one would notice that it wasn't the same. But there was something more. A four leaf clover. It was small, with a tiny diamond chip at the top. Amber knew, without even looking, the back was engraved with a Script "A". She had gotten it for her charm bracelet on a trip to Chicago last year. Her heart jumped. He was bolder than she was. She looked up and he was grinning. She felt his arm around her waist one more time and he slipped away.

Link pulled her down to sit next to him in the booth. They chatted with the kids and each told their stories. Corny worked the room, pointing to the bandage on his head and waving his arms retelling and retelling the story he edited to an acceptable version. Mostly he was passed out and she had been the hero. She had to smile as he told it over their table to Bix who arrived late. She blushed at the appropriate times and looked like a horrible victim. She knew how to work it too.

She excused herself for the ladies room. The girls were all busy telling of their adventures or horror stories they had been told. Someone's sister's cousin was crushed by a tree. A child had been sucked into a storm drain out of his mother's arms, on and on. She made her way to the back hallway and opened the door. She saw her reflection in the mirror. Her hair wasn't fluffed as high, her dress was duller than normal but she didn't look too much different. Just felt different.

As she stepped out, a strong arm encircled her waist and she felt his breath on her ear whisper, "Quiet, it's me." He pulled her into Finian's storage room. It was dark and she could feel him more than see him. Her arms went around his neck as his lips covered hers. A deep kiss, with a tangled embrace, it was all over too soon for either of them.

"I don't like sharing youâ€¦" he whispered.

"I know." Was all she could manage as she clung to him.

He kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose. "You go first." He gave her a gentle push. She brought her shoulders up and her head high as she walked out. The wall was her only support for knees that felt like jello.

He stood in the storage room an extra minute. This was not working out to be a fun experience. He knew that the best things in life were those one had to work for, but this was a different kind of effort

than he had to put in than ever before. His body told him to show her the ways a man makes a woman moan. Now. But he fought every nerve he held her. This was not going to be easy. Not easy for months.

He strutted in the way that only Corny Collins could. Across the room to where Bix told his story. The car had engine problems as they made their way out of town. The police arrived to help push it out of the way. They were soaked as they got into the backseat. He had never been in a police car. He found the dashboard fascinating. He had heard about the rest of the evacuees making their way from the city on the radio as itâ€|â€|.

Corny looked up as she stood to go. She was slightly flushed as her eyes met his. His hand reached for the small charm that dangled from the new found chain. She smiled and looked down. Link's arm encircled her waist as he led her out. At that moment, he could have killed the kid. A tinge of crushing jealousy overcame him. He took a deep breath and counted in his head, resisting the urge to run after them. He flashed a smile and returned to the story unfolding around him.

"I'm sorry Link," she said as they turned, "I told my mother that I would be back. You understand."

He looked at her with much more concern than she wanted to see. "Okay. Are you alright?" He asked as he touched her cheek, "You look sick."

"I'm fine. I'm just tired." She lied, "I just want to go home. I need some sleep."

She looked back one more time but he didn't return the glance. "I'm glad we're all okay." She said with tears in her eyes.

"I'm glad you're okay." He replied as he kissed her forehead.

She smiled weakly as they headed out the door.

## 12. Chapter 12

\*\*\_Thanks for all the reviews! Just a warning, if you didn't like the attitude about Link in the last chapter this one won't be too good either, but please view the movie again. Link abandons Amber, remember?\_\*\*

12.

They spent their days catching glances. They spent their evenings sneaking embraces. That spot under her new vanity, while always a sanctuary, became a place of stolen kisses and hidden notes. She was always with him although physically they were apart. He watched her dance and his body reacted. He watched her sing and he hummed along. When Link sang dripping love songs, he mouthed the words. In the end she would smile at him over Link's shoulder. It made it all right. He knew that embrace was for him.

He would not allow her to come to his house. It was risky in so many ways. Someone could see her, they could get caught. Even if she parked away from his home, someone could see her walking. But more

than that, in his mind, the idea of having her in his comfort zone was just too much for him to resist. Dreaming of long lovemaking sessions was one thing, having her there was quite another. He honestly told her that he couldn't have her there for just this reason. She kissed him and affirmed her apprehension as well. She was ready for anything from him, but knew the word 'wait' was their mantra.

They stole time together in the strangest places. The Library became their hidden paradise. He could stick his nose in a book and greet the other kids until she arrived. She would say her quick hello to show him she had arrived then head to the research section to spread her notebooks and pencils. A quick flip through the encyclopedias to find a relative page and back to the children's section she went. They met by the Preschool books to quickly embrace and hold hands. Ever on the alert for big brothers or sisters accompanying siblings to the area, they stole what they could and counted the days to more. It would come one day and not soon enough.

Movie theaters were dark and quiet. Even on a Saturday afternoon. They always picked an art film that their workmates wouldn't dream of attending. The theater near the library was safe. She would leave her schoolwork sitting on a table and scoot through the back alley to find him in the back row. He could touch the places that she longed to be touched in the cover of darkness and pull back when he heard soft throaty moans. He held her and she sighed. They were always separate when the lights came up. She would take the back exit and he strode out the front looking around as he entered his car, he would watch her run back in. She never looked his way.

Her birthday arrived with much fanfare. Velma would not concede to having the dancers at her party in the banquet room. It was a business affair. So she begged for a party at the studio to include all the kids. Velma arranged a catered affair with a huge cake that she couldn't eat. Lovely. They were all called on command performance to the studio. They hugged and congratulated her over and over. Link proudly stood by her side, grinning and glowing. He had seen a change in her since the whole storm experience. She seemed subdued. Her clothes had gotten duller. Unless she was at that studio, her makeup and hair were not always perfect. He had talked to his mom about it and she chalked it up to Amber's near death experience. But Link suspected it was more. He caught her looking across the studio more than once. To the podium and the strong presence there. And the man looked and smiled. What ever happened in that storage room was not spoken of, but Link somehow knew that it was something. A something between them, they held in secret. He was crazy jealous but when he tried to pry information out of her, she laughed and repeated the same story. Link stayed close to her when he was around. He wasn't letting her go that easily.

Corny strode up at his usual start time. He went to the podium and shuffled through papers. He wanted so badly to run to her, passionately kiss her and announce that she was now his, but it wasn't true. June was three months away and until then she remained in her place. Not his.

"Go tell my daughter Happy Birthday Corny. She's eighteen." Velma commanded from the front of the podium.

Yikes! They had agreed, they wouldn't speak today. Not before the end

of the show anyway. "Ah, Velma, she looks pretty busy over there. Tell her I said 'happy birthday' later." He said without looking up.

Never one to be dismissed, Velma would not be deterred, "She doesn't want to hear it from me. Go now." She saw him looking at his watch, "You have the time, go."

He looked at Velma and sighed. He bounded off the podium and through the crowd of dancers around her. She looked at him in shock.

"Happy Birthday, Amber and many more" he said with a small smile. He extended his hand.

She looked at the hand then looked to his face. Tears came to her eyes and she threw her arms around him. "I wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for you. Oh thank you!"

Oh God, he couldn't help but smile. "It's okay little girl. It's okay." He pushed her away and Link took her hand. "Where would I be without my lead dancer?" Their eyes were still locked as he turned, "Where do I get cake?"

Link stared at her as tears flowed from her eyes still watching him as he left. She looked up at Link and fell into his embrace. He stroked her hair and guided her away. Away from the party and away from him. He felt it, he saw it and he knew it. She was his no more.

### 13. Chapter 13

13.

\_\*\*I had to write the movie in or the rest would not make sense. Please give me some poetic license here with the facts of the film. I think you'll like it in the end.\*\*\_

Life changed with the advent of Tracy.

Amber was supposed to hate her, so she did. Hissy fits, flying insults and temper tantrums were expected and Amber came though. She whined about her to her mother every time Corny insisted she lead the dancers. For her size, she moved with grace and her exuberance took over the atmosphere of the show. In some ways, she was a welcome relief to Amber. Her spotlight drifted and it didn't bother her at all. She told Corny how hard it was to play the wounded coquette when she felt she owed her so much. Tracy became a star all around Baltimore and although Velma was an even bigger bitch because of it, Amber felt relieved.

And Link. He really liked the girl. The day he followed her onto the bus with the kids from Negro day, her ego was a little crushed, but only because the other dancers saw it happen. The girls looked away from her as she stood at the fence. Vicky put an arm around her and sighed an apology. Amber tried to care. She faked tears and ran to her car. She grabbed her calendar. Small hearts marked the days until June 15th. She had six weeks until graduation and two days to the live show welcoming the new studios. She would hold the Miss Teenage Hairspray crown for the fourth time and secretly laugh. There would

be neither Miss Teenage Hairspray nor any Corny Collins by July. They would be gone.

She arrived home to her mother's syrupy concern. Becky had called and relayed the story. Amber had to come up with tears fast. They sounded fake even to her ears but Velma saw what she needed to see. Her baby was wounded. She shifted into control mode and left. Her mother instructed her to call the Turnblad house. She did as she was told. She couldn't think about the trouble she would get Tracy into, she couldn't be concerned. She needed to be what mother wanted, if only for a few weeks more. She couldn't leave a hint of what was to come.

Things moved quickly after that in a way that Amber couldn't even expect. Her hair was perfect, her dress was darling, and she practiced her steps before the mirror then ran to the car. She wanted his approval before this started or she would lose her brat mode. And tonight she had to be a bigger spoiled rotten brat than she had ever been before. It was expected. He smiled as she came in. They practiced the steps for the opening number. Her body reacted just a bit as his hands encircled her waist during the song, but she had to ignore it. She was the star and as she grasped his shoulders she felt in control of the situation.

Then it began to fall apart. She danced and smiled for the cameras. Then Tracy came in. She grasped onto Link like she was cued but he followed Tracy. Amber was taken aback. This wasn't right. She looked confused as she sat in the giant rocket Tracy had descended in. It started to rise. She looked to podium, but he was laughing and dancing right along. She slipped out, with crinolines flying and landed with a thud. He never saw her. By the end, her mother was being escorted out by security and he was dancing with Maybelle, crowning Inez without looking her way.

Didn't he understand? Without her mother at that studio, neither was she. She would not be allowed there, she wouldn't see him. There would be no way to arrange for meetings, no time alone. This couldn't be happening. He never gave her a second glance as her mother screamed for her from the hallway. She had made a horrible mistake. She was wrong. Without a thought she ran out of the soundstage and to the dressing rooms. She approached her vanity with dread, but the bracelet wasn't there. It didn't matter. It didn't mean anything anyway.

She snatched her purse and headed out the backdoor to the street. She wasn't sure where she was going but she needed to be gone.

He looked around the studio as the music played on. Link and Tracy, Seaweed and that blonde girl all danced together. And he thought, when he leaves, Maybelle can take over his role. She was smart and talented. This worked out just fine. Integrated was his ticket out. Painlessly, while cutting his friend a break she wouldn't have gotten any other way.

He scanned every face. Where was she? He kissed Maybelle's cheek and headed to the dressing rooms. He peered under her vanity. She wasn't there. He searched with dread. Where had she gone? He ran outside and looked. Not there. He was tempted to scream her name when he rounded the corner and saw Velma throwing belongings into her car. She wasn't there. Suddenly his heart dropped. He wanted nothing more than to see



her. What was going on? Where could she be?

She sat in the coffee shop feeling dead. She was now old enough to get stinking drunk but in her pageant dress and broken heel she was too afraid to walk into a bar. She sat and thought. Of her life, of him and of all the terrible thing he personally did during that contest. Her dreams ended this night like the pain in her ankle that subsided as she walked the streets for hours. She had enough, she couldn't think about him anymore. Her heart told her that she just wanted to be in his arms, her head told her that he had made a fool of her. Her head won out.

She made her way back to the payphone and dropped a dime in. The cab company number was easily found on the front pages of the phone book. She had something she needed to return. To his mailbox would have to do. Her hand felt the small lump above her left breast and finally tears flowed. She lost everything tonight, she may as well make it final.

The cab pulled up as Corny was dialing Velma's house again. sure that this time someone would pick up. He saw her step out and relief washed over him. Oh God! He slammed down the phone and threw open the door as she was lifting the lid on his box. He grabbed her and pulled her inside. "Where were you?" he asked in her ear as he held her.

He realized that she didn't return the embrace. The last thing he expected was the look of distain he saw as he stepped back.  
"Amber?"

"I've come to return this." She said simply as she dropped the cross into his hand.

He stared at the gold in total disbelief and realized that she had already walked past him toward the door. "No wait!" he cried as he snatched her by the arm.

She expected him to go to a cookie jar someplace to retrieve her bracelet. She didn't want it. He could keep it to remind him of the mess he left when he walked away from her. She hoped it burned a hole in whatever container he kept it in. She hoped it burned his house down.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked, "Why are you leaving me?" She looked at his face as he stood in total disbelief. His eyes darted from the necklace to her eyes.

"Because you left me already." She retorted, "You don't care about me at all." Damn those tears. She closed her eyes and turned her face away from him.

"Baby please, don't think that." He had never considered begging for anything in his life. Now he was willing to beg. She surely wasn't upset about this pageant thing. She played it all so well. He didn't know who she had spoken to, maybe her mother, who poisoned her with her own tainted thoughts. Whoever it was, he had to convince her.  
"Don't go. I can't let you."

She wanted to leave. She wanted her feet to move. She willed them to. They stayed firmly in place He encircled her and held her against him, "Don't leave me" he whispered, "Please don'tâ€¦"

"I won't see you" she sobbed as she rubbed her forehead against his chest, "Without my mother there, I can't be there. You ruined it for her and you ruined it for us. I won't see you again."

He really hadn't thought of that. How would they see each other?  
"I'll find a way to get to you. I'll work it out."

His lips drifted down to her neck and he kissed every space that he could reach. Her head tilted back and she moaned.

"Tell me that you're sorry that you forgot me." She whispered.

"I am so sorry." He replied without stopping.

"Tell me that you'll miss me."

"I can't be without you." He moaned as he ran his fingers down her back.

"Tell me that you'll never leave me."

He stopped and looked boldly into her eyes, "I love you. I will never leave you, ever."

She looked deeply into his eyes, "Oh Godâ€¦". And she pulled his lips down to hers.

He didn't care anymore about resolve. He didn't care about 'wait'. She was there, in his world and in his world she would become his tonight. Amber Von Tussle was gone. In the morning there would only be Amber lying beside him, wrapped in his arms. His Amber. And only his.

## 14. Chapter 14

14.

It was amazing to her, how much of a change could happen in six weeks. She didn't look any different, but she was. Six weeks ago, her mother ran a station, she was a lead dancer, her mother's daughter, and kept a secret love. Today a ring joined the small crucifix that hung around her neck. Symbol of what would come when they crossed the country and started their life together. He knew it was there, no one else needed to know. She buttoned her bodice until it could no longer be seen and slipped into the white graduation gown. She straightened the mortar board on her head which held a goodbye note for her mother and stood looking at herself.

It had been so long. She smiled and turned to the baby pink room one more time. Was there anything she wanted to take? Not a thing. She had been stashing clothes for a while, telling her mother that charity needed them before their move to the new apartment, now since the house was being sold for the dance school. He would meet her by the Salvation Army to transfer them to his car and take them away to his Dad's. When she skipped a library trip and met his Father, he was wonderful. His Dad had his eyes. They sparkled just like Corny's. He was sad when Corny told him of their plans, but saw the way his son looked at this girl. He would never be happy with anyone else.

And of course, mother would buy her new clothes as soon as the Dance Studio took off. Amber was to teach the little girls. She giggled. Now mother was on her own. She could abuse anyone but her.

Amber walked slowly down the steps as her mother's flash went off over and over. She looked around her and smiled. The last pictures this woman would have of her would reveal the most genuine smile she ever had. A smile for him.

She continued to snap pictures as Amber got into the car. Damn woman would you hurry up. She continued to smile through her annoyance. No sense in a scene now. She wanted to get there, hoping to catch sight of him in the audience. She would openly smile at him today. He deserved it.

They turned their tickets in and found the seat her mother would occupy. Amber's eyes scanned the hall. She didn't see him.

"Amber you have to join the students." Her mother commanded. She had already begun to network, looking for investors for her studio. Amber was dismissed. She was glad.

She found her seat amongst the graduates. She wasn't that far from Tracy. She had to say something to her. She wanted to leave in peace.

Link was rubbing her shoulders as he spied Amber making her way over. He stiffened and stared at her hard. It was a warning, he was being protective. Right at the moment, Amber found it sweet. "Hi Link." She sang as she stood a few feet from them.

"Hi Amber." He replied unpleasantly.

"Tracy, can I talk to you." She smiled at her.

"Oh hello Amber" she said as she instinctively leaned back on Link, "Sure."

"Tracy, I just have to tell you," Amber began, "I meanâ€¦I would like to apologize to you for all the things I ever did to you. All the things I said, everything. I'm sorry and I want to wish you the best." She offered her hand, "I hope you can forgive me."

"Who is this?" Link thought, "Who is this girl in Amber's body?" Seaweed stared, Penny stared, Link's mouth fell open in disbelief. Only Tracy had the grace to stand and take her hand.

"Thank you Amber, I wish you the best too." She genuinely smiled, "Where are you headed to after this?"

"West." She said honestly, "I'm waiting for someone to sweep me off my feet."

Now they all laughed. Link knew that Velma probably had a rich husband lined up for her now since her show biz dreams were gone. He smiled uncomfortably. At one time he cared about her. A lot. Now, although she beamed, he knew the life she was going to. He felt for her.

"Good Luck Amber." He said softly, "I hope it all works out for you."

"It will Link." She smiled, "It will."

She waved as she made it back to her seat. She still didn't see him but she knew he would be there. No doubt.

The ceremony began with all the boring speeches and self congratulations. Lord this was going to take forever. She turned and waved at her mother while scanning the crowd. She still didn't see him.

"Oh hurry. Please hurry." She thought

They began to call out names. Through the As, Bs and Cs. On and on they droned through the alphabet. They called Link's name and she cheered. She looked back and saw a figure in the doorway of the hall. He crossed his arms and leaned on the jam. It was him. Her heart jumped. She flushed and turned back to the line of graduates slowly making their way across the stage. Her mind drifted to their last kiss. She wanted to go to him. She could have jumped up and forgotten all of this but that wasn't the plan and would not give them time to get away. Her mind came back as they announced the students T through Z. Her row stood up.

She glanced back and he waved. It was almost time. Tracy was only seven people in front of her. She walked across the stage and smiled. Amber clapped and mounted the steps as she tingled. Then it was her turn. She took the scroll and said thank you. She bounded down the other side of the stage.

Link was smiling at Tracy's return when Amber ran by. He watched her. She ran back to her mother who seemed ambivalent to her as she kissed her cheek. Velma smiled at her but returned to her conversation. Link felt bad for her and expected Amber to walk back to her row. Instead she dropped her cap on her mother's lap and continued down the aisle to a figure with open arms. Link stood up and squinted. He leaned over to the girl next to him and asked to borrow her small opera glasses. He looked through and adjusted the focus. Well if he wouldn't just be damned. He was right all along. Corny Collins embraced her and kissed more deeply than Link had ever done. Suddenly the image disappeared. He handed the glasses back but they were gone. Link had to smile. Sweeping her off her feet alright. On the winds of a hurricane.

## 15. Chapter 15

\_\*\*For Tracy, my mentor\*\*\_

### Epilogue

Maybelle stared down at the writing on the envelope of the Christmas card. It looked familiar but not enough that she could place it. The postmark said Baton Rouge. She really knew no one there. Someone knew her.

She found a letter opener and slid it along the top. She pulled out a card with a beautiful nativity on the front. As she opened the card,

the picture slipped to the floor. She looked but her curiosity made her open the card before picking the picture up.

"Merry Christmas and a Joyous New Year

Love, Corny, Amber and Camille Collins +1"

She finally recognized his handwriting from the note underneath.

"Dear Auntie Maybelle,

We want to see you and the gang. Give us a call.

Love Us"

Their phone number was scrawled across the bottom.

Maybelle lifted up the picture and smiled. Amber glowed as she looked down. She was obviously pregnant as she held a toddler on one hip, with dark curls and huge blue eyes. Corny rested his head on her belly, eyes closed, his arms encircling her. Amber's fingers caressed his cheek. They looked perfect. She had gotten a few calls from him since they left three years ago but he could never talk long or tell her where they were. After a while of searching, Velma had gone on with her life and her studio was relatively successful. Maybelle guessed that she wouldn't care to see her grandchildren anyway. They aged her.

Maybelle was waiting for her own grandchild. Penny wasn't this far along. She walked over to her and showed the picture. Penny squealed. How cute was that! The other family members came over and passed the picture around. Each of them smiled.

Maybelle picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello?" she heard Amber on the other end.

She smiled, "I'd like to speak with Mrs Corny Collins please."

"This is." She said softly.

Maybelle grinned, "It's Maybelle Stubbs, Momma. How are you feeling?"

She gasped, "Wait!" she heard her yell, "Corny it's Maybelle. She's on the phone!" Amber came back on the line with a smile in her voice. "I'm fine. How are you?"

Corny snatched the phone from her. "Take Cammie." She heard him say. "Ms Maybelle, you got the card."

"I sure did Daddy. Are you taking good care of that girl?"

"Alwaysâ€|â€|â€|â€|."

Maybelle knew THAT was right.

End  
file.